

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #22 – Kunchok Jungnay
June 26, 2007

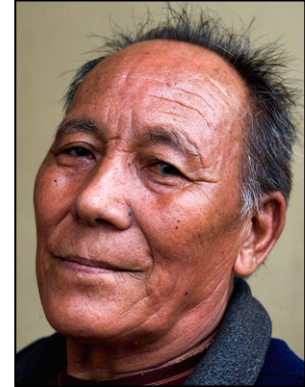
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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #22
2. Interviewee: Kunchok Jungnay
3. Age: 71
4. Date of Birth: 1936
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Bala
7. Province: Dhotoe (Kham)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1958
9. Date of Interview: June 26, 2007
10. Place of Interview: Temple of Old Camp No. 1, Lugsung Samdupling Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 56 min
12. Interviewer: Martin Newman
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Tsewang Dorjee
15. Transcriber: Tenzin Yangchen



Biographical Information:

Kunchok Jungnay first became aware of the Chinese in Tibet when he saw an airplane fly over his region, which caused great fear among the people. Never having seen an airplane before, they called it the *chasha* ‘iron bird.’ When the Chinese initially arrived in his village, they flattered the small children and gave them cigarettes. Once they became addicted to the nicotine, the Chinese would not give them any more cigarettes.

Kunchok Jungnay left his village, Birizong, at around 23 years of age and joined the Tibetan *Chushi Gangdrug* Volunteer Force at Chatsa Diguthang. The Chinese army approached in large numbers, while the resistance fighters numbered only 50 to 100 horsemen at the most. The *Chushi Gangdrug* members fought for three days and nights, but ultimately lost the battle. Kunchok Jungnay recalls terrifying moments during the attack when bullets from Chinese guns were “popping like grains frying over a fire.”

After escaping to India, Kunchok joined the Indian Army at Chakrata. He served there for 14 years and then moved to Bylakuppe, India, where he lives with his family. When Kunchok visited Tibet in 1989, Kunchok learned that his parents had died of starvation in 1969.

Topics Discussed:

First appearance of Chinese, resistant fighters, Chushi Gangdrug guerrillas, Dalai Lama’s escape, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Interviewee: Kunchok Jungnay
Age: 71, Sex: Male
Interviewer: Martin Newman
Interview Date: June 26, 2007

Question: Please tell us your name?

Interviewee #21: Kunchok Jungnay

Q: Do you give your permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use this interview?

#22: Yes, you can use it.

Q: Let us begin.

#22: Yes, please do.

Q: Can you tell us something about your life in Tibet before the Chinese invasion?

#22: I left my village and wanted to go to Lhasa, but I could not because the fighting had started, led by the *Chushi Gangdrug* Volunteer Force. So I came to Kongpo, crossed the Tsangpo River and then traveled towards Dhakpo.

Q: But could you tell us about before the fighting began, when you were a child? What was your life like?

#22: Our livelihood was farming and we used to cultivate our land. My parents looked after me.

Q: Where did you live?

#22: The place was called Biri Zong. It was a district under the Tibetan government.

Q: Where is that?

#22: It was close to Penpar. The real name is Shota Lhasum.

Q: How many people were in your family?

#22: My father, mother and two younger children, three older children and myself. There were many of us. How many is that?

Q: What kind of work did your father do?

#22: My father was a farmer. He ploughed the field and cultivated it.

Q: Where did you go to school?

#22: In Tibet, we never had help like we do here in India to start schools. However, I studied Tibetan for about two-three months. Then the teacher, who was old, died and I had to discontinue. So I have little knowledge of Tibetan [reading and writing].

Q: Today, do you have any special memories of that time when you were a child?

#22: The happiest times were when I lived with my parents and they cared for me. Then as I grew older, there was no happiness.

Q: When did life start to change for you and your family?

#22: I was about 23 years old when things changed for us. We lost our country and many bad things happened.

Q: What was the first news you got that Tibet was being invaded or that changes were coming to your life?

#22: At that time I was a child. I was young, but not so young that I do not remember. An airplane flew over the river Gyamo Ngochu [Salween River]. This river was known as Ngamchu at the source and where it flowed down towards Chamdo, it was called Gyamo Ngochu. The airplane flew over this river. We said that a *chasa* 'iron bird' had come because we didn't know the word *namdu* 'airplane.'

Q: When you saw the iron bird, what did you think?

#22: It was very scary. I was afraid. When the iron bird flew, we looked up at the sky and felt scared.

Q: What did you think it meant?

#22: We had never seen an airplane in our village and we called it the *chasha*. It was said that that [plane] was the Chinese and we wondered how such bad things came. We were very agitated.

Q: What happened next?

#22: After that, the Chinese gradually arrived [in our region]. They came and fished in the streams. At that time, I was a child and not used to smoking. They gave me cigarettes and told me to smoke.

Q: The Chinese came and fished in the water?

#22: They fished and in the evening they ate the fish.

Q: So your first encounter with the Chinese was not a bad experience?

#22: I didn't think they were bad. In fact, they seemed kind. Since we didn't smoke, they told us to smoke and flattered us. But when we got used to smoking after we had grown up a little, they wouldn't give us cigarettes even if we begged them. They would tell us "tsolo, tsolo" 'go away'.

Q: You were 23 at that time, is that correct?

#22: I was quite old enough as I used to smoke, like wayward school boys do.

Q: Please continue to tell us what happened after the Chinese came? They fished—it doesn't sound like you were afraid of them at that time, or were there bad things happening? What happened after that?

#22: Then they became worse and worse. Let alone refusing to give us cigarettes, they wouldn't even allow us to come near where they stayed. Initially, when they came, they seemed humble. Then they became more and more wicked. Finally, we lost our country.

Q: How did the Chinese army in your town change when the invasion started?

#22: Many Chinese [soldiers] arrived and occupied Lhasa. They occupied the whole of Dhotoe, Dhomay and Utsang. They arrested anyone who opposed them and suppressed the people. His Holiness the Dalai Lama was forced to flee.

Q: You were still in your home village at that time, is that correct?

#22: No, I was in the *Chushi Gangdrug* at Lhoka.

Q: Let's back up a little bit. How did you come to join the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

#22: As I told you earlier, I came to Kongpo. From Kongpo I couldn't go to Lhasa, so I went towards Dhakpo and then to A-Lha Gyari and then Chatsa Diguthang. The army camp [*Chushi Gangdrug*] had been based at Chatsa Diguthang, but when I arrived there, it had moved to Tsona, which was on the border.

I joined the army. There were fewer men under Amdo Lekshey at Lho Dhuguzong, so I was sent there to help them. Andrug Gonpo Tashi and others had gone to Nyenmo. It was

during the time that the battle was going on in Lhasa that we were sent to Dhuguzong. When we were sent to Dhuguzong, Norbulingka had been lost and His Holiness the Dalai Lama was escorted to India.

Q: At that time you joined the *Chushi Gangdrug*, where was your family then? Were they still in the village, or did anything happen to them?

#22: I was alone. My whole family was left behind in our village.

Q: So you joined the *Chushi Gangdrug*. And then, what were some of the first activities that you did?

#22: Since there were fewer men at Lho Dhuguzong under Amdo Lekshey, I was sent to join them. The *Chushi Gangdrug* had a little *phokong* there.

Q: What is a *phokong*?

#22: *Phokong* means a sort of salary for the soldiers by way of food and drinks. So I was sent to assist [the group] there. At that time, Norbulingka was lost and His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left for India. After that, the Personal Security Officer of His Holiness escaped and came to Dhuguzong. He stayed with us.

Q: What did you feel the moment that you heard that the Dalai Lama had escaped?

#22: I thought “Where should we go now?” I was worried and wondered where His Holiness the Dalai Lama had gone. Later we heard in Dhuguzong that he had left Mon Tawang and was heading towards India. When we heard that His Holiness had reached India, there was both joy and sadness in my heart. Sadness that we had lost our country, and joy that His Holiness was in India.

Q: After that, what kinds of missions did you go on with the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

#22: I joined the *Chushi Gangdrug* because I couldn't go to Lhasa. I went to Tsona and then to Dhuguzong. Lhasa and Norbulingka were lost. The place where we were was close to Bhutan. The Security Officer had fled to where we were. But it was useless, because they [the Chinese] were gradually closing in on us. They reached Lhoka and continued advancing, and then the Chinese reached us. We fought for three days and nights and lost the battle.

Q: Can you tell me a little more about the details at the battle at Lho Dhuguzong? For example, how many of you were there and how many Chinese were there?

#22: The Chinese were as numerous as ants. We were around 50 horsemen in the group, or at most about 100. We had to move separately in different directions.

Q: Did you engage the Chinese or did the Chinese surprise you?

#22: It was the Chinese who attacked us and they were the ones who conquered us. We had to flee from Dhuguzong. Those escaping from Lhasa thought it would be safer at Dhuguzong, but ultimately we had to escape too.

Q: Do you know how many people you lost in the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

#22: We were staying at the *zong* ‘fort’ and fought for three days and nights. We did not lose many men as the fort was quite strong. We fought for two days and one night. We were expelled from there and escaped towards Bhutan.

Q: Do you know how many people died?

#22: The men were all in different groups: some were at Khongchung Sera, some stood guard at the *tseri* ‘hill top,’ some at the cross road at Dhuguzong Monastery and some in proper Dhuguzong. There was a monastery at Dhuguzong.

Q: You didn't know how many people were killed?

#22: With my own eyes, I saw two men killed.

Q: When did you realize the battle was lost?

#22: We lost and we had to flee. First, those guarding the hilltop were defeated. Then the Chinese came and their bullets were popping like grains frying over a fire. There was no way we could stay there as they [the bullets] fell like rain. Then we fled Dhuguzong. There were not many guerrillas there. The Security Officers from Lhasa had joined us, but in general, there weren't many men. We were expelled from there [Dhuguzong].

Q: Can you tell us something about what that flight was like? Were you fleeing on horseback or on foot and how far did you have to go to reach safety?

#22: There were horses. I jumped on my horse and had no time to carry any thing. I couldn't even take a handful of *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley.’ I just grabbed my weapons and raced. Some were killed as they were riding away. Irrespective of whether we got killed or not, we sped away.

Q: How long did you have to ride to reach safety?

#22: It took three days. When we lost Dhuguzong and fled, we reached Mila Senga Guthok, the place where Jetsun Milarepa endured many hardships. From Senga Guthok, you could cross over Mola Kachung and reach the Bhutanese border.

Q: How far is it from Lho Dhuguzong to Mila Senga Guthok?

#22: You would reach it in about a day on horseback.

Q: Where was it [Mila Senga Guthok]?

#22: That was the place where Jetsun Milarepa endured hardships and built constructions.

Q: Is that in India?

#22: That is not in India. It is in Tibet.

Q: Were you close to India then?

#22: We were close to Bhutan.

Q: Did the Chinese then stop chasing you when you reached there?

#22: They were still pursuing us. We had to flee both day and night because they were chasing us.

Q: Until which place?

#22: We crossed the river at Mila Senga Guthok and then to Mola Kachung, which is close to Bhutanese territory.

Q: And then in Bhutan, you were safe?

#22: Once we had crossed the mountain pass, it was Bhutanese territory and there was no fear. But the Bhutanese would not allow us to continue farther.

Q: That's what I wanted to ask next. How did the Bhutanese receive you when you got there?

#22: They would not let us go on, and we faced a lot of problems. We reached a Bhutanese village called Phu just after we crossed the mountain pass. They stopped us there. One or two monks of Lama Gyupa [Monastery] died here, I think from starvation. The Bhutanese kept us there and would not allow us to go on to their capital city, Thimpu.

Q: The lamas who came with you or the lamas...I don't understand.

#22: The lamas had also escaped [from Tibet].

Q: The lamas that had escaped with you. So there they were starving to death?

#22: They probably died of starvation, as the Bhutanese would not allow us to move ahead. We were stopped there. We considered fighting the Bhutanese, as our soldiers possessed arms. By then His Holiness the Dalai Lama had arrived in India, and we received his advice that we should not fight with any country and should surrender our arms to the

Bhutanese. That was His Holiness' advice and even though we did not want to give up our arms, we had to.

Q: What were you feeling at that time when you gave up your arms to the Bhutanese?

#22: I felt very sad when I had to give up my gun. But even if I was sad, that was the word of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. His Holiness' words are like gold nuggets [gets emotional]. We had to immediately give them up.

Q: The Bhutanese are not allowing you to go to the capital, Thimpu, and you had to give up your arms and there was no food for you. What did you do?

#22: After we had given up our arms, we were gradually sent to India in groups. Along the way, we were provided with little food.

Q: How long did you stay in Phu?

#22: Not for many days, perhaps 15 or 16. I am not sure.

Q: What were the conditions in which you lived?

#22: We were desperate, and those who had guns went to hunt for animals. And at times, out of utter desperation, some domestic animals belonging to the Bhutanese which had been left out to graze were also killed under the cover of darkness.

Q: What was the reaction of the Bhutanese to that?

#22: Once our arms were given up, the Bhutanese let us go.

Q: Before that?

#22: The Bhutanese soldiers, wearing khaki shorts, did not even know how to pull the trigger of a gun. When they chased us, we could have fought them, but the words of His Holiness the Dalai Lama were, "Give up your arms, for they are useless. Be obedient to them and listen to what they say." So we were forced to be humble.

Q: What happened after the 12 or 16 days that enabled you to leave and then where did you go?

#22: After we had given up our arms, we were gradually escorted in groups of a hundred or so towards India.

Q: What was the first place you arrived at in India?

#22: It was something like Hathisa [?]. I have forgotten the name of the place. Once we reached India, we were very happy because food and drinks were available.

Q: Was that still in the mountains, or was that in a lower elevation place?

#22: We had crossed over the mountains and Hathisa was in the plains. Then we came to Buxa.

Q: How did you react to the different change in the weather and climate?

#22: Once we reached India, it was unbearably hot. I couldn't sleep because of the buzzing sounds of the insects, the insects biting me and the overpowering heat. There was a stream running nearby, and once I went and immersed myself in it. I placed my head on a stone and slept very well [in the water]. It was so hot.

Q: How did your friends and comrades also react to coming to India?

#22: They were also tired and felt the heat just like me.

Q: Was there any sickness there, or was everybody able to come in good health to this place or were there problems?

#22: Some were sick because of the heat. I fell ill at Buxa and was hospitalized for quite a while.

Q: What was the nature [of the illness]? Do you remember what caused the sickness?

#22: It was a fever.

Q: How long were you in Buxa?

#22: I might have stayed there for several months, but I cannot remember clearly. Except for the illness, we were happy there. There was no work to do, and the Indians provided us with sustenance.

Q: How did you spend your days there?

#22: It was a place that they said was originally a prison for Mahatma Gandhi. We were living in tents. The Indian government found jobs for us, and the first batch was sent to Gangtok.

Q: So you started road construction. How long did you say you were in Buxa?

#22: It was a few months. I was in the second batch that was sent to Bipana [?], close to Dharamsala, where His Holiness the Dalai Lama lives.

Q: That is a different place than Buxa?

[Interpreter to Interviewer]: He said he was sent for road construction; the first batch to Gangtok and the second batch to Himachal Pradesh.

Q: And you did road construction there?

#22: Yes, I was there building roads. It was hot there. We learnt that the Kullu-Manali region was cooler, and so we requested that we be sent there. Later we were sent to Kullu-Manali.

Q: What was the name of the first place?

#22: It was Palampur.

Q: Kullu-Manali was in India?

[Interpreter to Interviewer]: It's in Himachal Pradesh.

Q: So you were doing a lot of traveling at this time. Where did you think you would end up?

#22: I thought that was how I would be leading my life. The Indian government's Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and His Holiness the Dalai Lama had a talk and the Tibetan settlements were started. First, the school in Mussoorie was established and then the settlements. When they established the settlements, we were working in Manali. When the Tibetan Settlement in Bylakuppe began, I could not join it because they selected only married couples with children. We who were bachelors were not sent to the settlements.

Q: What kept your spirits up at this time, through all these troubles and changes of place? How were you able to keep your spirits up?

#22: When I fell ill, I had to make a great effort. Later I got acclimatized to the country. Once you are adjusted, like these days, we are happy in Bylakuppe.

Q: Do you love the hot weather?

#22: When it is very hot and if I have work to do, then it is difficult. When there is no work, I am happy.

Q: Before you came to Bylakuppe, while you were still waiting to come here, did you have any word of your family; what had happened to them?

#22: I didn't hear anything.

Q: Have you ever heard anything? Did you ever find out?

#22: Yes, I heard. I managed to get a telephone number from someone who came from Lhasa. But this year, the telephone doesn't seem to be working. Perhaps the number has

changed. I wanted to wish them “*Tashi Delek*” ‘blessings and good luck’ for the Tibetan New Year, but I couldn’t get through. Earlier I was able to telephone them and in fact, I went to Tibet once.

Q: Did you find your family?

#22: I met them. My parents are dead. I met the others. My father and mother died of starvation in the year 1969.

Q: I am sorry. When did you go back?

#22: In the year that His Holiness the Panchen Rinpoche passed away, I was in Lhasa. In those days, people were allowed to go to meet their relatives.

Q: But which year was that? Do you know?

#22: Perhaps 17-18 years have passed by. [The year was 1989.] His Holiness the Panchen Rinpoche has since then been reincarnated.

Q: What did you feel when you returned to Tibet and saw your family?

#22: I could not meet my parents. I met my younger sister and others. I was very happy to see my relatives. However, I felt very sad when I learnt that my parents had died of starvation.

Q: I am curious, how were you allowed to return to Tibet? [Under] what conditions did that happen?

#22: At that time, people were allowed back and forth. They were issuing visas in Delhi. If you went to the Chinese Embassy in Delhi one day, the next day you were ready to leave. They were letting a lot of people go.

Q: How long was your journey there?

#22: The most difficult part was from here to Nepal. It didn't take long because you were going by bus. I went to Delhi, received my visa—that year they issued visas to any number of people who wished to go. There is a monastery in my village and I purchased some icons from Delhi, which were considered very holy, as presents. I had to pay quite a huge sum as tax to the Nepalese. Though I didn't have much money, I managed to reach Tibet.

Q: Let me return now to your first days in Bylakuppe. What was it like for you when you came here?

#22: I did not come to Bylakuppe with the first settlers. Those of us who did not have wives were left behind there at the road construction camp.

Q: So when did you come to Bylakuppe?

#22: After the people were sent to the settlements, the bachelors remained at the road construction site. At that time Company 22 was started in the Indian Army at Chakrata. When that began, all the bachelors joined the army.

Q: How long did you serve in the Indian Army?

#22: The Company was started in 1962 or '63 and I was there until 1976.

Q: And then you came to Bylakuppe?

#22: Yes, then I came here.

Q: So Bylakuppe had been seven years in existence. What did you do when you got here?

#22: I had a relative here, who is now dead and I came to live with him.

Q: You have been happy to be here ever since?

#22: I experienced happy as well as difficult times. When my relative's children got married, there was no place for me to stay. My relative had passed away. So I moved out and served as cook for the Nursery School for 6,500 rupees. By then I had a wife and a child. That's how I lived.

Q: Do you have any relatives here now?

#22: My relative is dead. When he died and his children got married, I moved out. I earned my livelihood. Then I met my wife. We had a child. I was 61 when he was born. Now the child is ten years old.

Q: Congratulations!

#22: [Laughs]

Q: That's wonderful!

#22: I was 61 when he was born. Now I am 71 years old. The child is giving me a lot of problems.

Q: Only a few more questions. What advice would you like to give to the younger generation of Tibetans?

#22: I have a child who is 10 years old according to the Tibetan calculation, and 9 years old as per the Western calculation. I will leave him a will that independence for Tibet must be achieved, and advise him to study well—he doesn't study hard and is naughty at times.

He must complete his education and serve the Tibetan government. He must do whatever it takes to get back to Tibet and face the Chinese. If we cannot do it in our lives, we have to leave it for our children. We have to hope for it during their time. It has become difficult during our lifetime, but since His Holiness the Dalai Lama is living, I have still not lost hope.

Q: What do you mean by “face the Chinese”?

#22: There is something called the truth—that Tibet was an independent country before. Nowadays His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been advocating nonviolent ways, but the Chinese do not listen. That is like the example of a big insect eating a smaller insect.

Q: You feel that the younger generation must fight to regain independence?

#22: There are millions of Chinese and we are less in number. It is difficult to fight, but there is something called the United Nations Organization. It is the duty of the United Nations to care when the big insects are eating the smaller insects. Otherwise, why do we need the United Nations? That is their responsibility.

Q: So you hope others will support the cause?

#22: Yes, that is right.

Q: What do you hope will be preserved about Tibet?

#22: If we get back Tibet, we should retain it through education. Earlier, we lost Tibet because we did not have education and the people were ignorant. I think the lack of education was the prime cause. The outside world has education, and they started the United Nations Organization and many other things. We have to appeal to them and request them to help us. Tibet was an independent country and the United Nations Organization should have supported us.

Q: Thank you very much and I am honored to be with you here.

#22: You are coming from a foreign country and I am very happy that you asked me these questions. Thank you. I request you to support the cause of Tibet.

END OF INTERVIEW